

Wives and children with the Army

Mrs. John Smith and Ann Smith

“John Smith and wife from camp recommended by Captain. Child Ann born Jan. 12, 1780.”
From the baptismal records of the Presbyterian Church, Morristown New Jersey

Mrs. William Garr and Sarah

“William Garr a soldier and wife – child Sarah born Jan. 27, 1780.”
From the baptismal records of the Presbyterian Church, Morristown New Jersey

It is very difficult to find specific information about the women that shared the hardships of army life with their soldier/husbands. Thanks to the record of baptisms kept at the Presbyterian Church in Morristown we have some names of actual military families that probably lived in the army camp in Jockey Hollow. Unfortunately, we have no other information about these specific families, but it confirms that fact that women and children were part of the Jockey Hollow encampment.

The “women of the camp”

At the time of the American Revolution, the extreme hardships of a soldier made military life to be generally considered for men only. But there were women and children who traveled with the army and suffered the same hardships, even those of the “Hard Winter” of the Morristown 1779-80 encampment.

The women who lived and worked among the troops were generally called “women of the camp.” These were typically wives of soldiers who, for whatever reason, were not able to provide for themselves or their families the necessities of life. They were therefore forced to follow their soldier-husbands, due to poverty, or the failure of their farm. Some were refugees, due to enemy occupation of their homestead.

Having women and children follow the army was discouraged by the leaders of the American military. The Continental Army found it difficult enough to feed the fighting men, let alone any extra people. In August of 1777, when General Washington needed the army to move quickly, he stated that

the multitude of women in particular, especially those who are pregnant, or have children, are a clog upon every movement. The Commander in Chief therefore earnestly recommends it to the officers commanding brigades and corps, to use every reasonable method in their power to get rid of all such as are not absolutely necessary ...

The army wanted to keep a careful limit on what women were in camp and received limited army rations

No provision is to be issued to any Woman or Women whatever but such as may be ordered by the commanding officer of the regiment nor is any woman whatever to be admitted or harboured in camp except by leave obtained from the commanding officer of the regiment for which the commanding officers of companies will be responsible.
January 2, 1780 Hazen's Regiment, Hand's Brigade Regimental Orders

But as the war continued, members of the army realized the benefits of women in the camp. During the Morristown encampment of 1779-80, the Pennsylvania government complained to the officers of the regiments from that state about the “evil..of generally indulging soldier's wives in drawing rations.” In his reply by letter, General Edward Hand stressed that, while abuses should be corrected, the army should not withhold from “deserving” women “that degree of support which necessities oblige them to solicit (*sic*) and which in many instances the services of their sons, husbands or fathers give them a kind of title to demand from the public.” He mentions their usefulness “in cooking, washing & mending, attending to the sick &c” and so advocates that “a number of women of good character proportioned to that of the men in each company be allowed to draw rations in each reg(imen)t.” (*General Edward Hand to Joseph Reed, President of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania, March 19, 1780.*)

In the final year of the war, Washington had to concede to New York troops and provide special assistance to their families. He explained that these some of these troops were

“... Long Islanders and others who fled with their families when the enemy obtained possession of those places and have no other means of Subsistence. The Cries of these Women; the sufferings of their Children, and the complaints of the Husbands would admit of no alternative. The latter with too much justice remarked "If *pay* is with-held from *us* , and *Provisions* from our *Wives* and *Children* we must all starve together; or commit Acts which may involve us in ruin." Our Wives add they "could earn their Rations, but the Soldier, nay the Officer, for whom they Wash has naught to pay them." In a word. I was obliged to give Provisions to the extra Women in these Regiments, or loose by Desertion, perhaps to the Enemy, some of the oldest and best Soldiers in the Service. (*George Washington to the Superintendent of Finance, Newburgh, New York, January 29, 1783*).

Some women of the camp demonstrated great bravery, attempting to assist troops during actual combat conditions, such as women of the 6th Pennsylvania Regiment who took empty soldiers' canteens and returned to the scene of battle with filled ones during the most intense fighting during the Battle of Brandywine, although warned repeatedly concerning getting near the line of fire

There is still debate whether “Molly Pitcher” is one individual or representative of many women who were in combat, but it is certain that a number of women served in some kind of combat role, such as Margaret Corbin (who during the war was given a lifetime disability pension by Congress and is buried at West Point) and Deborah Sampson (who served as a soldier until her true identity was discovered, and was supported by Paul Revere in her successful appeal for a military pension.)

The records of how many women and children stayed with the Continental Army are varied and incomplete at best—informed estimates by historians differ, but an examination of the evidence seems to indicate that the number of women in camp represents about three percent of the size of the army, or one women for every thirty men. (see John U. Rees “*The multitude of women ...*”) But there is no doubt that the “women of the camp” (including some families) provided great assistance to the men, and shared in their hardships.

Sources:

John U. Rees “*The multitude of women ...*” *An Examination of the Numbers of Female Camp Followers With the Continental Army* <http://www.revwar75.com/library/rees/wnumb1.htm>

“Searching for Molly Pitcher” <http://www.visitmonmouth.com/archives/splevnt.asp>

1837 pension application of Sara Osborn excerpt <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5833/>

For information on Sampson see <http://www.masshist.org/objects/2005march.cfm>

Alfred F. Young. *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier* (New York, 2004) See <http://www.common-place.org/vol-05/no-04/author/> for an interview with the author.

Letter of General Hand to Joseph Reed, March 19th 1780 from New Jersey Historical Society Proceedings, Vol. 23 (1894) No. 3 page 23.